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# RIVAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

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## V. EVANGELICISM OR MODERNIZED PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY (*Concluded*)

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### 3. The Influence of Recent Attempts to Understand Christianity

Of late the Christian spirit has been diligently working upon a new interpretation of itself. If the positions assumed in the foregoing statements be tenable, then the imperativeness of restating the Christian faith can be escaped only by him who abandons its hope of universal dominion. For, indeed, it is in obedience to the high demands of the faith itself that men have been exploring and mapping out afresh the territory it has covered in its course.

A reinterpretation of the faith has been sought through a historical recapitulation of its progress in time and space. The birth of the historical spirit came late in Christian circles. Until quite recently the history of Christianity was studied mainly for apologetical or polemical purposes. Catholics supported the claims of their church by referring to an unbroken historical succession. Protestants sought to prove that Catholicism was a pagan corruption of the true faith by comparing it with the early Christianity. Later on, the Deists sought to establish a similar charge against orthodox Protestantism. Orthodox apologists like Lardner replied with evidence corroborative of the historicity

of biblical accounts. The work of the historical criticism of biblical documents was soon under way. At last a direct interest in the history of Christianity was aroused. It shared in the spirit of scientific exploration referred to above. The Christian historian came under the sway of the scientific conscience for facts. The apologetical and polemical interest began to give place to the love of truth. By unmeasured diligence and patience the long story has been gradually unfolded. The perspective of nineteen centuries and the broad horizon of present world-knowledge have combined to produce certain overwhelming convictions.

To begin with, the Christian religion, whatever be its source or its ultimate explanation, is a distinctive spiritual force in the world of men, increasing in momentum from age to age, permeating more and more the self-conscious life, the social relations, the political institutions, and the industrial enterprises of the people who come under its influence. It seems destined to dominate the world. In the successive stages of its career it has produced or assumed many forms of expression—discourses, prophecies, hymns, churches, schools, types of architecture, forms of ritual or liturgy,

and bodies of doctrines. Each one of these seemed at sometime essential to it, but they have all been under constant process of change. They pass, but it survives. It is greater than any or all of its creations—greater than the Bible, the churches, and the creeds. Its value lies in itself and not in something that is a means to its progress. Its truth lies in its own inherent power and not in its conformity to some standard outside of it. Not less wonderful than its many changing forms is the constancy of its character. For, notwithstanding the disharmonies and perversions that have arisen in its course, it has ever tended to turn the minds of men trustfully to an Unseen from whom they came and to whom they go, a heavenly Father; it has spurred them on hopefully to a personal ideal that ever beckons them on to the better life and, though itself always in advance of them, is very real to them because it fulfils itself daily in them; it has inspired them with undying courage and strength because it has made them conscious of a Power dwelling in their hearts and ever filling their lives with greater worth. It has therefore thrown itself freely into the great enterprises of men and has stimulated them constantly to new enterprise. It has thereby pushed the race on to higher achievement.

In all this it has borne a distinctive character. It has made men aware that the greatest thing about them is their inner life—in this lies the clue to all that is worthful, the bond that unites men to one another and that brings them to fellowship with God. It has always purified that life, removing the selfishness, the cowardice, the malice, and the

lust. It is communion-forming. It has united men in mutual love and esteem, it has purified their intercourse from immorality, it has bound their wills together in the pursuit of ends which could never be attained without this pure love. It has filled them with the determination to unite all men finally in a common holy destiny, and teaches them never to give one another up, never to despair of men. None can be spared. Hence the labors expended so freely in behalf of the ignorant and the fallen. Its course is marked by works of mercy.

The historical view of Christianity has had a liberating and elevating influence on those who have participated in it. While it inculcates reverence for churches and creeds as forms in which the Christian spirit clothes itself, it teaches men to regard all these as only temporary. They are helps for a time but not authorities, good servants but bad masters. By looking backward men learn that their ideal is before, and not behind, them. Historical study has helped to create what I have here called evangelicism, the gospel of history, the message of the ultimate attainment of the Christian good.

Or, in the next place, we may turn to the recent study of the character and career of Jesus Christ. This is a special instance, in part, of the influence of historical study, but on account of its cardinal relation to our faith it is deserving of a separate consideration. It is not very long since the cry, "Back to Christ," began to be heard in Protestant circles after a long silence. It arose partly out of the feeling that traditional Christianity had wandered

far from the spirit of its founder, and out of the desire to recover its original purity and simplicity. The motive was practical rather than theoretical—the desire to live the true Christian life rather than the wish to construct a new Christian dogma. The hope was to find in the story of Jesus and in the record of his teachings the needed guidance and strength for the moral and religious life. Ecclesiastical strifes, doctrinal differences, metaphysical problems, were to be left aside and the character of his personality recovered. Men were to have a direct view of his way of life, his aims and hopes and ambitions, his estimate of men and his treatment of them, his outlook upon the world, and his heart-relation to God. They were even to live through his inner experiences. The motive was pure.

The outcome is rich in every way, but also surprising. For the religious purpose has been strengthened by the same scientific interest that operated so powerfully in the historical study of the Christian religion. The task has proved unexpectedly difficult. The labor expended has been prodigious, and the spirit and method of the study, on the whole, worthy of the subject. It became evident soon that there was much more to do than to construct a new “harmony of the Gospels,” or to arrange Jesus’ teachings in an orderly manner. The world of men and things in which he lived, the concrete circumstances that called forth his deeds and words, the traditions and other influences from the distant past that entered into his soul, had to be restored. Above all, the student could not solve his problem without seeking to reproduce in his own

soul the very heart-life of Jesus. Even this was insufficient. For it was as truly impossible to know him apart from the impressions he made on other people as it is impossible to estimate the character of any other man apart from the reflection of it in those who came under his influence. Indeed, we have no representation of his words and deeds that was given independently of the manner in which others felt about him.

We are here concerned particularly with the results for the Christian life. What are the most important of them? Summarily, first of all is the assurance that a human life possessed of the beauty and the strength, the meekness and the majesty, the tenderness and the sternness, the patience and determination, and all the other qualities that stand out in the picture of the evangelists was really lived in such a world and at such a time as that. The unspeakable comfort is ours that such a life can be lived, it is thoroughly human, it may be ours. An immense inspiration comes to make that life our own and to live it by faith in the same God. Then, too, we see that this life of his in its inner qualities is transmissible and has really been transmitted to others. It has flowed out into human life at large. It has become a permanent asset of the race. The more men familiarize themselves with the image of his personality reflected in the narratives and in the religious life that has been propagated from him as its source, the more his name comes to stand for the whole content of what is good for men and for the whole aim of their being. He has become the great companion of men. They feel that he is living with them all the time.

His spirit goes out conquering and to conquer. This is the faith he has produced in them and this is his great achievement. Him, therefore, they follow. With him they live, with him they die, and with him they reign. This may not be formal logic, but it is faith, and he has given it to them as their inalienable possession. The emancipating outcome of the study has also been very great. Men who cannot understand the creeds, who feel that the profound metaphysical subtleties that have been draped about him are beyond their power to comprehend, and who have believed that their faith can be only second-hand and dependent on authority have laid hold once more on the confidence that he is the friend of those who labor and are heavy laden and the meek and lowly may learn of him. A divine personality has triumphed once more over institutions and theories.

A third line of reflection that has powerfully contributed to the modernized Protestant Christianity is traceable in the renewed study of the inner life of the Christian soul. Until recently the subjective side of the Christian religion was scarcely regarded as affording the true basis for an understanding of its nature. The warmth of religious feeling in men has always tended to express itself with great freedom and confidence. Piety has often reveled in the joy and power of a new life in the soul. Mystics in all ages, like the born psychologists they are, have sought to trace in an orderly manner the working of the divine Spirit upon their own spirit in the hope of communicating, if possible, the great secret to others. But the very subjectivity of their represen-

tations, the extraordinary character of them, the common opinion that these men were the favored few—"saints" to whom were vouchsafed experiences denied to the common people—confirmed the tendency to repose the truth of Christianity on the external authority of miraculous events, or of the church, or of the Scriptures, or of the creeds, or of sacraments. The subjective experience of the Christian was conceived to be the result of receiving the objective realities.

But when the great revival referred to in the foregoing pages led to a reaffirmation of the worth of the religious experience, the way was opened to the work of reinterpreting the meaning of the Christian faith on the basis of that very subjective experience which had been so often disparaged. The great Schleiermacher led the way. The movement has grown to vast proportions. The psychology of the Christian religion has become a regular discipline in theological studies. Passing by the scientific product, the outcome for the Christian faith has been impressive.

For one thing, it has led Christians to perceive that their greatest possession is just the faith itself that has arisen in the soul. It is the man's inalienable wealth, and its power is inextinguishable. Even the inability to trace its source or to justify it intellectually is not fatal to it. It moves on in the soul and seems to have a logic of its own. Moreover, we have found that the experience is not merely subjective or purely individualistic. Its power of self-communication to others and its unifying power in communities of men are as impressive as its inner personal force. Then, too, it is discovered that religion of some kind

is universal. Men are not men without it. The way of approach to the votaries of other faiths is open. The Christian religion has points of contact with all other religions, and if it is destined to displace them, as we believe, that is because all that is truly worthful in them finds fulfilment in the Christian faith. This view carries with it everywhere a profound respect for religion. For the study of religions tends to confirm the Christian's confidence that his religious faith is that which more than anything else constitutes the mark and the excellency of human nature. The story of man becomes the history of his religion, or, putting it in another way, the religious faith of man is the wellspring of all his activities.

#### **4. A Characterization of Evangelicism**

The quality of the modernized Protestantism which I have chosen to designate by this name can be easily anticipated from the foregoing description of the influences which have combined to produce it.

First of all, there is the point of its religious emphasis: The worth of personality is supreme. In every being that has the capacity to know that "this is I," whether it be the child whose self-consciousness is only inchoate or the perfect man whose soul is aware of its dignity in such a masterly manner that it proposes to subjugate a world to its authority; whether it be the crude and coarse savage barely able to defeat the animal within or without him in the battle of life, or the man whose soul is clean and tender and aware of its kinship with the Unseen, there is in every

personality a sanctuary that may not be profaned by the foot of another without coming under a curse, a citadel from which he may repel all invaders because in his inmost being he is united with the Father of all. Hence exist the reverence for childhood and the respect for its rights, the sacredness of human life and the effort to make the most of its potencies in all, the horror at the sight of cruelty and wanton slaughter of men, and the leaping of millions of men to arms to guard the community of men from danger. This is modern religion.

Thereby the tasks of life take on a new meaning. None of them is worthless and none of them is tried in vain. Whether it be the lowly toil of him who handles the pick and shovel, or the delicate and recondite search of the highly trained physicist, or the appalling issues confronting the statesman and the soldier, makes no difference. These tasks are religious. In the midst of them, and not by separation from them, will the man find his salvation. All men are equally called by the Most High, and all are to be estimated in terms of his worth.

The very material universe loses its hostile or indifferent character and becomes the sphere in which self-conscious personality may find fulfilment of its powers. The universe is friendly and will not crush us. From it there come to us constantly messages of hope and inspiration. There is an infinite Good Will at the heart of things and nothing shall by any means hurt us. For in it and through it there is a personality that answers to us when we cry, a Spirit in whom our spirit becomes aware of its destiny, a God whose

fatherly purpose is revealed to us, his children. He will never leave us. Neither life nor death is a barrier to his fellowship with us. His very judgments draw us to him in lowly, loving assurance of safety. For his purpose toward men is not double but single, and he will not be discouraged in its pursuit. If the God of the early Protestant was conceived mostly as the Judge-Ruler, the God of the modernized Protestant is mainly the Father-Ruler.

Not less striking is the religious estimate of Jesus Christ. He is more than a remote figure for whose physical return men long and wait in vain, more than a mysterious union of two incommensurable natures to be revered in a mystery, more than the sorrowful sufferer who has renounced all earthly goods, more than the penal sufferer who awakens our gratitude by his death, but reserves his high prerogative to himself. He is that perfect personality who has sown himself into the life of our humanity in such a way that he can never be separated from the weakest or the worst of us, the great companion who carries us gladly into the very secret of his vicariousness and imparts it to us as our high privilege. No solitary grandeur is his. The prayer is never in vain:

O Master, let me walk with thee  
In lowly paths of service free;  
Tell me thy secret.

In the answer to this prayer the modern man finds his salvation.

In the next place, the moral ideal is correspondingly elevated. In place of the attainment of an abstract righteousness or freedom from judicial guilt and the passive peace that was formerly supposed to issue from it there is the

overmastering desire to attain to the life of ministry to men as the highest privilege of life. Personal worth is to be secured by unstinted self-giving to others. The true renunciation is made by achievement. The true heaven of rest is found in perfect action. The truly unselfish life is found, not in retirement from the world, but in the free commitment of one's self to the work of making the material and spiritual forces of the universe instrumental to the purposes of personality and to the work of permeating the affairs of men in all the realms of action with a sense of the infinite worth of every person, so that men may be bound together in a communion of good will. The man who smites with terrible blows the forces that rise in opposition to this ideal and who upholds with might the forces working in its favor is the true modern saint.

The whole man is involved in the pursuit of the ideal. Physical well-being and intellectual vigor have moral value. The material goods which serve the purpose of realizing the spiritual ideal are to be cherished and not despised. Intellectual pursuits are not a luxury, but a necessity of the moral career. The whole man in his unity must be saved, and that, not by submission to a mysterious force from without, but by means of his own hearty self-commitment to his task. This concentrated activity is not in order to rest, but in order to the attainment of more perfect action.

As the whole man is sanctified, so the whole of the natural order of society is sanctified. Institutions, such as the family, the school, the business corporation, the state, are no longer purely secular, but take on the same holy

character which has been ascribed to the church. They are modes of the progressive realization of that supreme moral ideal for which Jesus Christ gave himself—the kingdom of God.

In the third place, there is an institutional interest in evangelicism. The interest of institutions lies in their instrumental value. Institutions of all kinds are to be tested by serviceability to human needs. Churches and their priests or ministers, their forms of organizations and their liturgies, their sacred writings and their creeds, fall under the same rule as schools with their educational methods, civil states with their laws, and industrial orders with their processes of production and exchange—namely, the imperious demand that they minister to the creation of a community life in which the Christian ideal of perfect personality may find fulfilment. Without this, no matter how hoary their traditions or lofty their claims, they are *nehushlan*. Sanctity lies, not in institutions or offices, but in the character of the man whose higher life they serve. These things do not come to us with authority from without, but they are created from within the man and have their authority there. Evangelicism is institutionally free. And thus, with its broad and deep interpretation of the relation of the Christian religion to the forms in which the spirit of the man has clothed itself in the past or may clothe itself in the future, it prepares us for the realization of the longed-for unity of all Christians and finally of all men.

Finally, there is the theological trend. The theology of evangelicism is yet to be written, for the most part. It would be impossible within our available space to

indicate even in barest outline the contents of this theology. Only a word or two may be said about its general character. To begin with, the theological interest will be deep because theology is a part of that same spiritual life in men which is active in faith. As this faith grows theology must advance. Then, too, the theology of evangelicism will be sensitive to all those other world-forces which we have enumerated as uniting to produce it, and it will attempt to give a religious explanation of them all. Moreover, it will have a distinctly practical aim. It will strive consciously to give to the believer the guidance he needs in performing his duty in the midst of those currents of power by which he finds himself surrounded. It will be the theology, not of the monk, but of the man of affairs. For this reason it will be free from bondage to all or any past forms of doctrine or to its own forms of doctrine, because all doctrine is ultimately dependent for its value on the faith it seeks to expound, and as faith grows doctrine must develop also. At the same time it will have a profound respect for the theology of the past because that theology was the expression of the religious faith of those times from which our own faith has been derived. Most of all, it will seek to be true to the Christian spirit by keeping in sympathy with the purpose of Jesus Christ and the purpose of God revealed in him, for therein it finds its inspiration and its support. The particular manner in which it will go to work to reconstruct the expression of the eternal realities of the Christian faith must be left for discussion in a future work.